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AUTHOR Pannekoek, Frits
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ABSTRACT

In the past decade, significant advances in information technologies in the Euro-American world have fostered the creation of information monopolies. The prices imposed by the monopolies, whose products are largely in the English language, have caused academic libraries to focus almost exclusively on international scientific and cultural materials demanded by their researchers. This has resulted in an insidious and progressive marginalization of regional cultures. After careful consideration of this issue, the University of Calgary's 1998 Library of the Future Task Force recommended that the University of Calgary adopt an integrated approach to information that incorporates both production and consumption activities. The university would move to a "just for you" library and provide information through contracted electronic access whenever possible. To ensure that it becomes a net contributor to preservation and dissemination of knowledge rather than just a consumer of products of the information monopolies, the library will work to preserve primary materials by creating a digital archive of materials about and produced by Western Canada's Aboriginal communities, thus taking national and regional community needs into account. Whether the proposed policy change will succeed in reducing the marginalization of regional culture remains to be seen. (Contains 14 references.) (MN)

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Crossroads of the New Millennium

Information Technology And The Marginalisation Of Regional Cultures: Rambling Thoughts From The University Of Calgary Experience

Prepared and Presented

By

Dr. Frits Pannekoek

Associate Professor

University of Calgary

email : fritsp@ucalgary.ca

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Workshop 2

A. Billingsley

1

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Abstract

In the last decade significant advances in information technologies in the Euro American world have fostered the creation of information monopolies. The prices imposed by the monopolies, whose products are largely in the English language, have caused academic libraries to focus almost exclusively on international scientific and cultural materials demanded by their researchers, since their work is constantly being assessed in an international rather than a national context. The result has been the insidious and progressive marginalisation of regional cultures. After careful deliberation in its 1998 "Library of the Future Task Force," the University of Calgary determined that

an integrated approach to information resources incorporating both production and consumption activities could significantly improve the situation. The University would move to a "just for you" library, providing information through contracted electronic access when ever possible. To ensure that it became a net contributor to the preservation and dissemination of knowledge rather than just a consumer of products of the international monopolies, its intentions included the preservation of primary materials and the publication of manuscripts in digital form relating to the region to ensure that national and regional community needs were taken into account. Whether this approach will succeed in reducing the marginalisation of regional culture remains to be seen.

Information Technology and the Marginalisation of Regional Cultures: Rambling Thoughts from the University of Calgary Experience

In the last decade significant advances in information technologies have allowed for the aggressive commodification of information particularly in North America, Europe and Japan. Until recently sophisticated information was available at no cost or little cost to scholars, to the communities in which they lived, and to students. Today, enveloped in the illusion of the Web's inclusive anarchy, information technology has allowed for the development of information monopolies that are threatening the competitive abilities of smaller countries, and the cultures of marginal groups. In Canada national site licenses are required for electronic data, for example, because only one of the nation's universities can afford them all. English language interests, who are for the most part located in the United States or Great Britain, further dominate the information monopolies. As important as the growth of the information monopolies, that are threatening to marginalise all but the wealthiest nations and their universities, is the growing apparent irrelevance of regional cultures.[1]

My argument is as follows. Because the smaller regional universities are struggling to pay for the new technologies and the information they transmit, they begin to neglect the information wealth of their own regions. The budget to collect is gone. The cost to digitise is too high. The market is too small. There are no aggregated "purchasers" of this regional information. "North American" or "European" information providers often do not index regional cultural monographs or serials.[2] When they do, the technical frameworks that determine their appearance on line act as a distorting filter for regional cultural realities. Indeed as regional universities increasingly become consumers and producers of global information, regional cultures become marginalised by their own universities, who often see success in a global rather than community or regional context.

In Canada the response to the commodification of information by increasingly global information monopolies has been to fund a national site-licensing project, which would see all sixty-four of its senior universities with the same general suite of electronic full text materials, indices, and data bases.[3] The Province of Alberta, one of Canada's wealthiest, has

[1] See various discussions for example by Stephan Harnad at http://www.princeton.edu/~harnad/

[2] OCLC announced in its last Newsletter that it was finally going to be including local history in WorldCat used by most North American University libraries (Nov/Dec 1999), No. 242, p.9.

[3] See details of the proposal at http:/aix1.uottawa.ca/library/carl/projects/CFI/project_rationale.htm

further responded to the fear of being excluded from the cornucopia of information the new age will bring, by devoting $4 million Cdn through a provincial consortia, The Alberta Library, to purchase full text data for its public and post secondary institutions.[4] Again none of these funds are explicitly designated for regional/cultural digital projects.

The impact of libraries and their devotion to the new global technologies on regional cultures is real and evident. Throughout the world, for example, library systems are generally American or British, although there are some exceptions. These systems have difficulty with non-roman orthography, for example Cree syllabics or Arabic script.[5] What happens when foreign technology drives "cultural systems" like libraries? Why acquire, or even create minority languages when the large scientific data bases, and the sophisticated information aggregators like Netlibrary, Thompson, or Elsevier exclude these because of the low demands, and more important because the economic poverty of the homelands of the minority languages. There may be sixty million Tamil speakers, but little profit in the aggregation or indexing of their digitisable heritage. Indeed it has been argued that in the next two hundred years most of the world's 6000 languages will disappear because of the power of these information monopolies.[6]

While many cultures may prove resilient, the indigenous cultures of the circumpolar world, where the University of Calgary finds itself are not. The introduction of "information aggregators" is having a profound impact. The European concept of literacy and cultural transmission and its traditional aggregator of information, the library, has eroded oral tradition and the wisdom of the elders in the Aboriginal communities. While the integration of the Aboriginal concept of community learning, and the importance of transmission of knowledge through elders into "knowledge" centres (libraries?) is possible, it has rarely been done well.[7]

The Europeanisation/Americanisation of information is an issue that should be critical to all "marginalised" cultures particularly those who are interested in the advancement and even survival of the unique languages that are their underpinnings. Without archived information,

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[4] For details see http://www.library.ualberta.ca/altalib/

[5] Zahiruddin Khurfshid, "System migration: challenges for libraries in the Arabian Gulf region," The Electronic Library (Vol. 16, No. 3), pp. 171-4.

[6] Gregory Stock, Metaman (London, 1993), pp. 87-88.

one example being books another digital archives, and a continuing language dynamic, the culture will surely die. There is not enough vitality in native publishing industries to ensure that the language will survive. Greenland offers hope, but even here experts are not sanguine about the long term.

The digital world will not likely bring Aboriginal peoples cultural salvation. Will Cree, Blackfoot, or Inuktitut and their varying orthographies be incorporated into the major search engines? A careful prowl through these search engines will find "samples" of these languages, but I have found no complete dedicated sites in which all materials are for example in Cree.[8] Instead these languages are treated as Internet oddities in the WWW Zoo.[9] Why this is so, is easily apparent. First the opportunities for commodification of this information do not exist. Advertising markets are non-existent and pay-for-view is not viable. Second, often there is little that can be put in digital form. The Cree and Blackfoot languages have a written culture, but they are fragile and have never found strong voice in the regional presses. Most important, the young people, who are the most computer literate, are quickly losing the language, inundated as they are with English-language Web sources.

Alberta's English and European language communities have also been impacted by the commodification of information. The two senior academic libraries in the province are generally more concerned with ensuring that the sophisticated databases of the world are available to their increasingly international researchers, drawn for the most part from the United States, than serving the cultural needs of the region. There are some Canadian mainstream cultural materials, but only marginally acceptable materials for other culture groups, like for example Alberta Ukrainians, who form a majority in East Central Alberta. There the local tourist facility, the Province of Alberta's Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village, hosts the only real cultural Web site, (http://collections.ic.gc.ca/ukrainian/) for this group. It successfully combines language, and material culture in a tourism-marketing product.

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[7] Reg Crowshoe and Sybille Manneschmidt, Akak'stiman: A Blackfoot Framework for Decision Making About Health Administration and Services (Brockett, 1997).

[8] See for example http://www.nisto.com/cree/. It is curious that in this University of Ottawa site, that while Cree is featured and some stories are in Cree – the discussion groups and most of the material is in English. See also http://aboriginalcollections.ic.gc.ca. Again there is some limited use of native language, but the majority of the text is in English.

[9] See Gordon Hill, Native Libraries (London, 1997) for a discussion on the impact of libraries on the minority cultures of the circumpolar world.

Those who would counter this, state that the regional communities can now use the Web to overcome obstacles placed by information aggregators and their monopolies. Communities can now create their own sites to evidence their language and culture. The market place will determine whether there is take-up. The point is however that archival Web sites require capital, operating funds and purpose. The enthusiasm of a small volunteer driven culture group without technical support will not be able to sustain their new virtual archive through the following centuries. While some academic libraries have shown themselves to be concerned and are working with regional groups to sustain community focus, most are concerned with nation or "national treasures" in their digitisation projects. Governments have shown some inclination to support this digitisation of their national treasures, but generally the initiatives have been by the dominant English-speaking nations, whose cultures already control much of the Web's content.

Canada and Alberta have lagged behind American and European initiatives. The government of Alberta for example has put no designated funds into the creation of digital cultural content that would allow regional history to participate and be validated by a presence on the Web. The federal government has been equally parsimonious in its caring.[10] Sadly neither Canada's National Archives nor its National Library has shown any real interest in providing Canadian full text access to the documentation of their past. America's Mellon Foundation, and Industry Canada, the National agency for encouraging economic growth, have largely under written the best of the activities, for example, "Canadiana Online," by the Canadian Institute for Historic Microreproductions.[11] It contains full text of all Canadiana published prior to 1920. Overall, Canada has the pipeline for information, but little content. This is symbolic of the predicament of the Canadian nation. Canada has an incredible capacity for technological innovation – but allocates few resources to support its cultures.

I should emphasise that I am focusing on peer-adjudicated electronic material or significant bodies of primary materials that would allow Canadians to reflect on themselves and on their past. My point is that while there are limited sites that advertise, and create awareness there

[10] See for example http://collections.ic.gc.ca which lists many of the sites across Canada sponsored by intermittent grants from Industry Canada.

[11] See Http://www.canadiana.org for the funders and origin on this project. While there are significant Canadian partners the project is being executed in the United States. It should be noted that university and state libraries not presses are involved in this project. In the pre electronic or pre microform days this would have been the responsibility of the scholarly press.

is little of the sophistication that marks the scientific databases supported and sold by the large information aggregators.

The responsibilities of medium-sized universities in addressing these regional cultural issues are subject to debate. Many argue that they must strive for international scientific excellence, and that they must measure their success against their peers at the great English-speaking Universities whether Harvard, Yale, Oxford, MIT or Cambridge. Today, libraries serving doctoral institutions struggle to provide information support for the aspirations of their researchers. In the next few decades, at least from a technological perspective, and if money is no object, any middle-range university will be able to duplicate the current holdings of the world's great institutions. The private sector and the universities themselves and their political masters stand to make significant revenues from the new intellectual properties they have helped create from this information. Once we have achieved information homogeneity in the pursuit of "metaman" researcher, what will differentiate the regional and middle range institutions, except the differing numbers of Nobel laureates?

Information Resources at the University of Calgary is becoming aware of these issues. Rather than focus its resources entirely on becoming one of the "virtual" extremities of the great universities, it has, as well, moved to root itself in the community and its culture with the objective of enriching both. How did this happen. Was there a sudden revelation of the evil realities of information globalisation? The approach that evolved at the University of Calgary was rather the result of a university community's genteel awakening over the last five years. It is best illustrated in its 1998 "Library of the Future Taskforce" which was charged with envisaging and developing a University strategy for information resources management.[12]

In 1995, the University realised that with the decreasing value of the Canadian dollar, the increasingly control of information by monopolies, the concomitant dramatic increase in prices, and the collapse of the province's resource revenues that its library was at a crossroads. Rather that abdicate to the crisis of terror, and allow the City of Calgary, an urban area with over one million people, to become an information have-not city, which it is still in the danger of becoming, the University decided to buy instant access to any information the University community needed. Access would be through the new technologies. The University would be served by a "just in time" rather than a "just in case"

[12] Http://www.ucalgary.ca/library/lftf/index.html

increasingly leased information. The University emphasised that its library would continue to be important as an information access point. However, it would build its national and international reputation not on being an "access" point, which indeed every academic library in Western Canada has become, but rather on its unique primary source collections. At the University of Calgary, these collections already existed (as much through accident as design). As important they reflected the heritage of at once Canadian and Albertan communities who had been questioning the relevance of their own identities within North America Free Trade fertilised continentalism.

In order to realise its potential role in archiving community information making it available while providing world information to its students and researchers the University reorganised all of its information related units. Units responsible for the production of information (the University of Calgary Press), the assemblage of primary information (the University Archives, and the Canadian Architectural Archives, the Canadian Literary Archives), the dissemination of existing information (the University Library and the University Image Centre) were all brought together under one administrative umbrella.

Initially this move would have seemed unremarkable, and possibly not even revolutionary. However it did become so, with the University of Calgary Press as the first agent of change. The University of Calgary Press was small with approximately a 156-title backlist, and an annual production of eight to ten titles on general topics. It had no real focus.[13] After careful reflection the management of the press decided that their interest should be more confined – to the heart of the North American continent particularly its history, its environment and its Aboriginal peoples. The argument was that if the University of Calgary Press did not assume responsibility for this region no one else would. With renewed focus, the press began to solicit manuscripts and within eighteen months of change of focus, the inventory of ten manuscripts grew to over sixty. Regional scholars long frustrated at being ignored by large academic presses, found a real outlet for their research. The press quickly provided a vehicle for the voices of women, Aboriginal peoples, and immigrants. All sought legitimacy and the validation that could be provided by a scholarly press rooted in their University.

There were other ways the University's press contributed to shoring up the foundation of eroding community cultures based in languages other than English. Alberta's unique primary collections are distributed amongst three or four large institutions at significant distances

[13] Http://www.ucalgary.ca/UofC/departments/UP

from each other and even greater distances from the many rural Albertan communities. The solution was based on technology – a digital Alberta archives and library aimed at Albertans no matter where they were. It would contain every local history, the homestead files (a symbol of first contact with the land), all local newspapers since their first printing, photographs, folklore archives, and Western Canadian art. The outcome of this project is not yet known since it is a work progress, however the results are promising.[14] The interest by communities in their past and their eagerness to have their local resources on the University Press Web became apparent as soon as we approached historians, genealogists and historical societies for copyright permissions. By being central to a University project, these communities felt and indeed have had their soul and past validated. The issue now will be what the press does with the increasing offerings of manuscripts, photographs and books that the communities are beginning to offer. The option of persuading donations to the "old" style archives may not be accepted by the communities. Some believe that the "old" archives hid their past, and that the new digital archives on the Web will liberate it.

Why? First, because the University is reproducing the communities' documents in whole without any intervention, summation or context. These communities are now part of the new global village. They can rekindle an interest in their past on their own terms. They no longer have to go a government-run institution, the Provincial Archives in Edmonton, or to a high-end privately run museum ultimately controlled by government. All evidence of their past that can be legally reproduced is available. Their past is the world's past.

This "digital" archive was made a project of the University of Calgary Press to ensure that the collections meet "academic" standards associated with refereed publications of primary sources. The intention is not to collect arbitrarily, but rather to provide existing primary materials in digital form based on long standing traditions of primary source publication. Integrity of the document must be paramount. There will be no interpretation. That will be up to the individual user. However, there is pressure beginning to build for the University to acquire a "literary" press that would be an outlet for the creativity of its students, faculty and community. There is a growing faith that many of the regional writers are amongst the best, and that it is the responsibility of the University of assist in their nurture.

While the press has become a focus for regional cultural renewal, the University's own archives are also "being" discovered. The Canadian Architectural Archives, the leading

[14] Http://www.millennium.gc.ca/cgi-bin/mill_srch.cgi?view_record_e&566

Canadian repository in this field, has just received University permission to begin a major fund raising campaign to encourage research, to conserve, and to add to the collection. The participation of the Nation, rather than region, in the archives has legitimised the University's national responsibilities in this field. The same is true of the "literary" archives, which also has a Canada-wide focus.

As smaller Universities develop niche or "boutique" collections with national roots albeit with a regional flavour, the regions will become stronger players in their nation's endeavours. It will also ensure that university information resource centres do not become little more than dollar aggregators for major information monopolies. If these university libraries do not focus on their unique regional collections and spend significant dollars building and making them accessible, they and their cultural contexts will vanish.

However, community information literacy issues, the technological capacity of individual users within the community particularly rural Alberta, and the strong attraction of internationalised search engines, makes the success of these initiatives less than assured amongst marginalised regions and peoples, particularly Alberta's Aboriginal communities. If in the past the book whether by an archaeologist, an historian, or an anthropologist supplanted traditional knowledge of the elders, now it is the Internet. The machine has replaced tradition. While in some cases the Internet has provided the ability for disparate communities to come together through chat lines and e-mail – there has been little evidence yet that this is happening in the Aboriginal communities in Western Canada. In a society where elders are respected, where communication and status is often determined by spatial rather than verbal considerations, and where the sharing of information has roots in ceremony, the Internet can only serve to alter existing paradigms of community interactions. The addiction to the new technologies by the young people is unavoidable. How can the new technologies be used to nurture a community so that it can determine its own rate of change within its cherished values?

There is however hope. A few Aboriginal communities have developed their own Web Sites, however few are heavy with content, and most remain little more than painful gestures of dying cultures. There are opportunities to use the Internet to advance the interests of Aboriginal Communities. Some opportunities are already unfolding in Southern Alberta. The relationship of people to land, and people to the heavens is at the root of Blackfoot folklore. While much of that folklore has been lost, much is replicated in the writings of early folklorists and anthropologists. The digitisation of these texts allows teachers and those

interested in cultural revival to have ready access to these stories for inclusion in the school curriculum, and indeed to put them on the Web in the language of children - unfortunately English. This has already happened particularly amongst the Cree and the Dene, although the impacts have not been assessed. This would be an incredible validation of Aboriginal culture by modern information technology especially if in indigenous languages. The new technologies will shortly permit the video streaming of elders' images, accompanied by language and folk tales in first languages. But poverty will mitigate any wide spread impact.

The issue becomes not the technology or its capacities, but the willingness of the dollar aggregators, the academic libraries, the government, and even business to ensure the longer-term survival of regional culture. University libraries have been for some time the most important aggregators of the information dollar. It can be argued that many of the information monopolies are creating high-end product solely for the university market. Surely, if this is the case the university libraries have to begin to view their broader responsibilities as cultural instruments. Yes, governments are increasingly playing a role in determining the placement of cultural material on the Web. However government content is often lacking in rigor and transparency, and is often directed in message. While business and business-supported foundations have been extremely generous, their own efforts at internationalisation in support of globalisation and "progress" make them less than creditable. The only way for regional information and its living cultural context to flourish in the digital age is if the academic libraries and their imprint arms become more holistic in their approach and realise their role in the validation of their host cultures. This does not denigrate importance of seeking validation for their scholarly efforts by their English/American international "betters" and "peers." Universities unconsciously fed the creation of the information monopolies, now they can consciously provide the lifelines for regional cultures.

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